

Teacher Education and Inclusionary Practices: Sharing Delhi University Experiences

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Abstract

Teacher agency is a dynamic catalyst in the process of inclusion, emancipation and social change through school education. This article highlights three key curricular practices in the structure, content and method of a process-based elementary teacher education curriculum aimed at enabling the emergence of this agency that characterise the author's work as a pre-service elementary teacher educator in a women's undergraduate college of Delhi University. The curricular practices are drawn from the interpretative frameworks of critical teacher education, pragmatist notion of reflective practice and humanistic theory centred on the self. The inclusionary practices are: academic empowerment through a critical engagement, self-development by emphasis on the personal context of student-teachers lives and opportunities for reflective practice in a specific socio-political locale during the course of fieldwork in school education. These inclusionary practices empower young women preparing to become elementary school teachers with professional agency especially preparation for a role as an agent of change in the process of social transformation. To the student teachers these inclusionary practices provide knowledge and agency aimed at critical thinking, personal growth and transformative reflective practice. The vision of schooling as an instrument for establishing an egalitarian, inclusive and humane social order; as a weapon of resistance that challenges structures of oppression; necessitates teacher education which includes such practices. The sharing of these experiences with the teacher educator community can offer possibilities for academic exchange contributing to the knowledge base of teacher education curriculum planning as well as enhancement of professional teacher education discourse.

Keywords: *teacher education, inclusionary practices, student teachers, teacher agency, school education.*

The idea of teacher agency

Education can be a potent agency for radical change through transformative practices. Teacher agency, in particular, is a dynamic catalyst in the process of inclusion, emancipation and social change through schooling. In the teacher education discourse, agency of the teacher and its continued development implicating teachers explicitly as

agents of social change, equipped with personal capacity to be able to act, is central to an inclusive and emancipatory education (McLaughlin & Zarrow, 2001). The need to strengthen the active agency of the teacher has been emphasised in teacher education policy in India as mentioned in various commission and committee reports over the last several decades. The positioning of school teachers unambiguously as transformative educators endowed with “explicit emancipatory, critical and transformatory role” (Hill & Boxley, 2007, p.54), who would harbingers of change, was among the promises underlying the introduction of a four year integrated professional elementary teacher education programme the Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.) at Delhi University in 1994. In pointing towards the social responsibility of educators the programme envisaged establishing school- community linkages, supporting social justice and empowering the marginalised as the social functions that school teachers are expected to perform (Sadgopal, 2001). The teacher is envisioned as central to the process of change in school education. This is significant as India has been characterised by a “largely stagnant teacher education sector” (National Curriculum Framework Review, 2005, p.8) with educational research in the penultimate four decades of the twentieth century pointing towards inertia in the structure, content, processes and modalities of mainstream teacher education programmes. More recently the academic- led policy discourse on teacher education curriculum as articulated in the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009 “speak of educating for and in a diverse society” while it “re-affirms the central role of teachers as agents of social transformation” (Batra, 2014, p.7). Teacher agency is the vital link that has the capacity to enable education to become a vibrant catalyst in the process of social change and transformation (Batra, 2005). The idea of teacher agency has drawn attention internationally in recent decades (Pignatelli, 1993; Riveros *et al*, 2012; Priestley *et al*, 2012) though theory and research aimed at its understanding is in a nascent state (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). The ecological framework of teacher agency argues that the lack of a comprehensive professional discourse and a relatively weak futuristic orientation, associated with their professional activities, among teachers; tend to limit their possibilities of utilising their own beliefs in achieving agency. At the same time research located in this framework concludes that it is largely the personal qualities that teachers bring to their work, that impact teacher agency (Biesta *et al*, 2015). The model suggests that teacher agency can be strengthened by “access to robust professional discourses about teaching” (Biesta, 2015).

The B.El.Ed. programme, on the other hand, has been regarded as one of the most robust programmes of elementary teacher education in India (Nawani, 2013) with explicit commitment to prepare teachers as change-agents so as to make a dent in the elementary education system of the country. The purpose of this article is not to

discuss contrasting models of teacher agency, but to seek a teacher agency framework that is in alignment with the orienting assumptions of the B.El.Ed. programme. Such an interpretative framework of teacher agency is rooted particularly in a theory of action viewing teacher agency as something that teachers do which also makes it possible to understand how people are enabled or limited by social and material constraints. Also teacher agency is something that is achieved in and through concrete contexts for action (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2012). It is viewed as capacity of teachers to “critically shape their responses to problematic situations” (Biesta & Tedder; 2006, p.11). This often requires actions counter to prevailing socio- political environments. These are actions prospective school teachers *do* or *cando* or *others did* in their individual capacity beyond policy narrative or systemic constraints. This professional agency is at the core of envisioning the teacher as a primary change agent who is a potential catalyst in the process of inclusion, emancipation and social change through school education.

Teacher education for inclusion: Enabling practices

This article is a personal narrative highlighting three key inclusionary practices in the structure, content and method of the elementary teacher education curricular framework that characterise the author’s work as a pre- service teacher educator in a women’s undergraduate college of Delhi University in New Delhi, India. They are drawn from the interpretative frameworks of critical teacher education (Hill, 1997, 2007; Hill & Roskam, 2009), humanistic theory centred on the self (Rogers, 1983) and the pragmatist notion of reflection (Dewey, 1933). The inclusionary practices are: academic empowerment by critical interdisciplinary engagement, self-development by emphasis on the personal context of student teachers lives as a point of curricular enquiry and opportunities for reflective practice in a specific socio-political locale during fieldwork in school education. They are aimed at an inclusive discourse, development of teacher agency, and teacher empowerment that is vital in recovering the critical role of education. They also attempt to strengthen the often neglected link between the preparation of teachers and classroom processes. These practices engender “the kind of possibility for change that can only exist when members of society are willing to see things as they are in order to create spaces for transformative action” (Porfilio & Gorlewski, 2013, p.12) and constitute the key components of teacher education for inclusion.

Teacher education is located within the general framework of school education with both the former and the latter embedded in their larger socio-economic and political context. The foreground of the relationship between teacher education, schooling and social change is the prevailing educational inequality especially the “class-based polarization” in schooling (Hill & Kumar, 2009, p.12). The schooling system in India

is an anti-egalitarian market of selection and exclusion. It perpetuates, supports and strengthens the existing undemocratic, unjust social order with graded inequalities that are exacerbating exponentially in contemporary times (Hill, 2013).

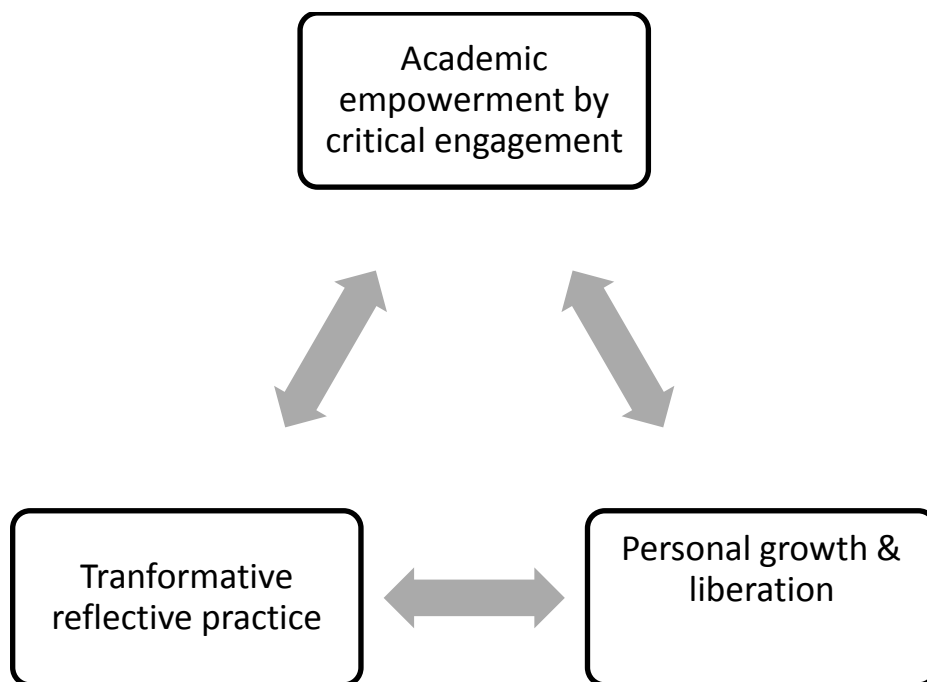
This graded inequality is compounded by the ascendant neo-liberal ideological offensive leading to “definitive retreat of the state as a provider of education” (Hill & Kumar, 2009, p. 1) even further.¹ Apart from accentuating educational inequality this has strengthened an instrumentalist view of education as a tool for economic gain accentuated by pro-market discourse on merit, assessment, learning outcomes and efficiency (Hill & Kumar, 2009, p. 14-23). While the teacher education practice is located in such a market based scenario (Sadgopal, 2006) policy continues to articulate egalitarian premises and goals. There has been a renewed thrust in teacher education policy in the recent years on social diversity, individual differences and equitable inclusion. The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (2009, p.19) states “The concern is to make teacher education *liberal, humanistic* and responsive to demands of *inclusive education*.” It is against this background that pre-service teacher education, that enables teacher agency, can be an important process of inclusion and empowerment. A humanistic teacher education for inclusion is necessary while envisioning schooling as an instrument of resistance that challenges structures of domination and works towards establishing an egalitarian social order.

In such a vision of school education, the meaning of inclusion in schools cannot be restricted merely to the creation of a new social landscape in the classroom with enrolment of children from disadvantaged sections of society such as dalits, tribals; and linguistic, ethnic and religious minorities or others who may be disadvantaged by their socio-economic backgrounds. These sections of Indian society were historically excluded from schooling. Inclusion is defined by and becomes operational by meaningful school participation and learning of all children (Singh & Kumar, 2010). The classroom practices and processes that act as barriers against this participation and learning would need to be brought down. Children from disadvantaged social backgrounds often have different knowledge, language, experiences and culture; in comparison to the mainstream school ethos. Emancipation is premised upon according equal respect to this experiential knowledge which alone makes it possible not to “limit human potential in our school systems” (DeLissovoy, 2015). This is premised on recognition of equality between teachers and students. This provides personal strength to students particularly from less powerful or disadvantaged sections of society; especially in their relationship with people, ideas and life at school.

Teacher education for inclusion, social justice and emancipation would imply that this diversity in the learners backgrounds be viewed as a difference rather than a deficit

(Deshkaal, 2016). This diversity can be used to develop possibilities “to democratize the teaching-learning processes and practices, and achieve the larger goals of social justice” (Deshkaal, 2010). This means preparing teachers to create classrooms where every child learns, which is what the inclusionary practices examined in this article aim at. Only this can lead to possibilities for social transformation in the micro worlds of children, classroom and schools that are the actual sites of change.

Figure 1 Teacher Education for Inclusion: Enabling Practices



Empowerment of the primary change-agent: The elementary school teacher

The Bachelor of Elementary Education (B.El.Ed.) Programme follows a process-based teacher education curriculum framework in which the student teachers professional preparation is integrated with education in the liberal disciplinary domains of science and humanities, accentuating the qualitative dimensions that enhance human potential. It aims to include ideas, themes and concerns that get often left out in programmes of teacher education (Kumar, 2001). Apart from theoretical enquiry, practicum courses, fieldwork and a comprehensive school internship there is emphasis on understanding the complex relationship between education and social change while attempting to create a critical consciousness among student teachers about possible role as change-agents. In the field based units of study and practicum courses the student teachers engage with diverse school settings over a period of four years and deepen their understanding of the social, cultural and economic milieu of diverse learners. This is aimed at enabling the student teachers to problematise the relationship between school, society and social change. The psychological study in the courses on child

development and learning is positioned along with both pluralistic social and political fabric of children's lives and an enquiry into contemporary issues (Batra, 2009). This fosters an appreciation about the socio-cultural and political contexts of children's schooling. The teacher is envisioned as a reflective practitioner who has capacity to locate her teaching practice in its socio-cultural, economic and political background. Endowed with this capacity she works to strengthen the elementary school system of our country with inclusive practices. Describing the B.El.Ed. programme as an exemplar of innovation in the education of teachers in post-independence India, National Curriculum Framework Review (2005, p.107) writes

The students engage with issues of politics of education within the classroom as they reflect on the best way of facilitating children's learning. This course is also designed to develop an understanding of contemporary Indian realities through a study of key historical, political, social, cultural and economic issues.

Critical engagement with courses in education

The courses that I teach in the B.El.Ed. programme "Basic Concepts in Education" and "Classroom Management" provide for critical engagement with conceptual foundations of education including concepts and sub-concepts like equality, diversity, inclusion, equity, freedom, social change and critical pedagogy. The student teachers also examine the issues of dominance and marginalisation through the lens of social class, caste, religion and gender. They are introduced to the optimism offered by new sociology of education, resistance theory and pedagogy of hope. The goal is development of critical thought aimed at fostering a vision of an emancipatory education in a democratic society and an appreciation that education for inclusion requires the existence of an equitable system of schooling. These critical curricular contents create the scope for understanding of contemporary socio-political and economic realities especially how they manifest as the wrongs of the schooling system. Concomitantly the contemporary viewpoint on professional development of teachers identifies its process as strongly connected to school reform. The double role of teachers in this process: of being the subjects as well as the objects of change makes the case for educating teachers differently, with emphasis on what is wrong with our schooling system, even more persuasive (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

The study of "Classroom Management" which is a practicum courses is not limited to formulating rules and procedures for maintaining learner engagement in teaching-learning activities or facilitating the conditions for learners' personal growth or even student teachers personal reflections of teaching-learning experiences. The notions of "management", "control" and "discipline" are deconstructed by the problems like: As free-willed agents should learners' be managed? Have we imposed upon ourselves the imagined necessity of viewing the class as merely confined to the classroom? Does an

engaging classroom need external management? On the other hand in the complex realities of overcrowded classrooms how does the educator maintain crucial working order essential for teaching-learning (Raina, 2016, p 3)?

Such a course of study creates the scope for critical thought particularly at the very beginning of preparation to become a teacher. In the voice of a third year student of the programme

All through the years I have always been thinking of managing the children, silencing them while performing some task until in a workshop of Classroom Management in the third year of my B.El.Ed. program where one of my teachers exclaimed , 'I need not manage my class when I myself wouldn't want to be managed!' . This was something which turned my thoughts to classroom management completely round and have been practicing them in my classroom where watching children talking or even roaming around in the middle of a task does not feel disturbing as it holds up the understanding of children's need to release their load throughout the day, their inherent nature to be as chirpy and cheerful as birds. This sight at times makes my day happy and as we say children interacting with each other and nature helps them in learning something which cannot necessarily be taught from books!²

Sharma (2015, p22) writes that pre-service training is an ideal time to work with young teachers around issues of diversity and inclusion in the classroom. In an exploration of the notion of inclusive education among B.El.Ed. pre-service teachers about the inclusion of not only children with special needs and the differently abled but also those who are excluded on the basis of caste, class, religion, region, language and gender; the student teachers were of the view that the B.El.Ed. programme equipped them “partially” and were “receptive in getting further professional development in how to make their classroom more inclusive” (Anamika, 2015). The study suggested appropriate curricular interventions pointing towards the inclusionary practices explicated in this article.

This critical engagement with courses in education is sharpened by academic interactions with several faculty members from a variety of disciplines that enables drawing from disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary frameworks. This is an enabling practice that becomes possible because of the location of the programme in the holistic environment of an undergraduate multidisciplinary college.

Academic empowerment by critical engagement and inclusive interdisciplinarity

The knowledge base of education being exogenous, the location of teacher education in the holistic environment of a multidisciplinary institution is an enabling inclusionary practice as it allows for opportunities to engage with various kinds of

knowledge. The college has eighteen different disciplinary departments ranging from sciences, commerce and the humanities, offering possibilities of engagement with parent disciplines and an interdisciplinary perspective. There are several multidisciplinary extension interfaces providing structural arrangements with integrated space for interdisciplinarity.³ The National Curriculum Framework recommends a major shift in teacher education programmes from a disciplinary, linear exposure to a multidisciplinary, multiple and divergent exposure (2005, p.110). It has since been argued that teacher education programmes be opened only in multi and interdisciplinary academic settings so as to enable an environment of holistic growth for student teachers (Justice Verma Commission, 2012; Srinivasan, 2015). Of the several multidisciplinary groups that function in the liberal atmosphere of the college, one is the “Equal Opportunity Cell” with members from different disciplines of study. Membership in this multidisciplinary group involves pursuit of a broader area of knowledge beyond the boundary of one’s discipline of study. This provides a structural space for interdisciplinary engagement with an integrated approach. The mandate of the cell is to ensure equity, social inclusion, equal opportunity for all students of the college and sensitise the college community about the problems of the marginalised,; aiming at inclusion of entire college community. The cell engages with concepts ranging from preferential equality, principle of protective discrimination, affirmative action, disability, special education, social capital, state policy and its implementation regarding social justice and promoting constitutional values. The speakers/ facilitators in these programs are not the teacher educators but are leading practitioners of other disciplines: - political scientists, sociologists, historians, philosophers, economists, policy analysts, social activists, filmmakers among others. There are opportunities to draw upon disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives during peer learning that occurs in various focussed group discussions. During this inclusive interdisciplinary discourse the student teachers stand at another vantage point revisiting ideas introduced in their respective courses in the classroom. They review the concepts, sub-concepts and ideas introduced in their own disciplinary engagement (elementary education) sometimes arriving at unexpected intersections because of this multiple, divergent and multidisciplinary exposure.

For instance the engagement in the equal opportunity cell begins with a theoretical exploration of the concepts of marginalisation, preferential equality and social capital. The member student teachers begin their educational studies with enquiry into how teacher- expectancies’ from students in the elementary school classroom, especially from those with disadvantaged backgrounds tend to become self- fulfilling prophecies often leading to low educational attainment. The participation in the cell’s programs provides a broader understanding of how a compensatory education drawing upon

concepts such as preferential equality and protective discrimination has the potential to debunk such prophecies. This enables the student teachers to deepen their understanding of ideas like teacher- expectancies' and self- fulfilling prophecies from an inclusive interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary framework; as also learn to “develop equal opportunities so that children do not suffer from labelling, under- expectation, stereotyping or prejudice from their teachers, or indeed, from their peers” (Hill & Boxley, 2007, p. 43). This pursuit of interdisciplinarity is not drawn from a canonical curricular framework but the location of the teacher education programme in the multidisciplinary environment of an undergraduate college. This is aimed at academic empowerment through critical engagement that fosters a strong interdisciplinary perspective located around the concerns of equity, inclusion and social change.⁴

Apart from broadening students' horizons with inclusive interdisciplinary there are two things that need to be pointed out about the work of the equal opportunity cell. The first relates to the consensual vision evolved by the cell's members about its role. As mentioned above the cell attempts to ensure equity, social inclusion, equal opportunity for all students of the entire college community. It is based upon a broader conception of inclusion of learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or marginalized on any other ground. This is in some contrast to the vision of the Delhi University's Equal Opportunity Cell, to which the college is affiliated. The Delhi University's cell in its mission strives to ensure affirmative actions concerning SC, ST and OBC; barrier free access to all buildings of Colleges, Libraries, Hostels and Offices of the University; no discrimination on grounds of disability or minority status; short term courses for imparting employable skills for the disabled and for raising awareness about disability and reaching out to like-minded institutes and organisations dealing with similar issues. There are limitations to institutional provisions for redemption of limitations caused by a disabling environment for persons with disabilities so far as the college is concerned. The focus in the B.El.Ed. programme is on the academic empowerment by appropriation of the academic resources available in the multidisciplinary environment of the college.

Secondly and more importantly the recovery of critical thought is central to the work of the equal opportunity cell. If school teachers are to be the key agents in the process of social change through elementary schooling then same changes must precede the initial teacher education curriculum during their preparation. There is an explicit emphasis on understanding the complex relationship between education and social change, from various vantage points across disciplines and theoretical orientations, coupled with courses in educational studies that seek to create such a critical consciousness among student teachers about possible role as change- agents. This

more importantly brings out the possibilities within the education system that can create institutions like the cell, which would work against the system itself by producing change- agents. The student teachers, from the unquestioning learners' who receive a prescribed course of study, transform into critical thinkers about the relationship between education and graded social inequality. This is a transformatory practice as the student teachers problematise the reproductive role performed by these institutions especially from their own location within them. There is awareness of the absence of the most marginalized that they sometimes hear about in their education but never see. There is sharpened awareness that education has not ceased to play a reproductive role in Indian society. There is realization from personal experience that there has been neither equal opportunity nor any real alleviation of discrimination or inequality in the institution(s) that they have attended. They interrogate the nature and kind of education that they are "receiving" as also the structures of domination that this education is embedded in. Is it radical enough to hold the potential to transform the society? Does it not continue to limit the ideas of inclusion or gendered, class or caste inequality to tokenisms in discourses like those of the Equal Opportunity Cell? Has there been any real equalization of educational opportunity at all? Perhaps not as the goal is seemingly incredible. Yet the work of the cell is a step forward in the recovery of critical thought and deepening the understanding of egalitarianism that is necessary for any radical transformation. They come to a vision of educational possibilities about what they *can do* as school teachers to contest the structures of dominance in the larger socio-political context.

Accommodation of personal concerns: Student teachers lives as teaching-learning context

In the structure of the B.El.Ed. programme theory and practicum courses run interdependently and concomitantly. This structural arrangement provides opportunities for both large group (whole class) as well as small group interactions between teacher educators and student teachers at the same time. In both of the pedagogic arrangements, there is sustained discussion which is particularly sharp during dialogic engagements in small group tutorials. Among the premises underlying such a practice is that our education system needs to create a dedicated psycho-social space for direct engagement with issues that most closely affect us (Gupta & Raina, 2012 b). This kind of a curricular structure is used to accommodate the student teachers personal concerns. In order to do that I often attempt to make their personal context as the starting point of curricular enquiry, as much as possible. This enables student engagement beyond what could be considered to be pure "academic" work in terms of the prescribed curriculum. Such a practice aspires for a conscious awareness of the self as an instrument of learning. I endeavour to carefully listen to what they want to say about themselves without opinionation or judgement. There is

encouragement to ask questions, tolerance for contestations and appreciation of social diversity. The student teachers bring their concerns from their own socio- cultural context to the classroom; and gain awareness about them in the teacher- student relationship. They examine the multiple perspectives on personal development emerging from different traditions of philosophical-psychological-educational thought and explore the inner subjective methodologies through which the process of self-growth can be facilitated (Gupta & Raina, 2012 a). This is enabling as it offers possibilities for personal growth and inclusion. The physical and psychological time that becomes available due to the long duration of the programme, four years, provides numerous occasions for such dialogic engagements and fosters the underlying processes.

The social landscape of the B.El.Ed. classroom presents multi-layered realities. There is an appearance of inclusion since the criteria for membership are non-discriminatory yet are characterised by a common urban context. The learners' (student teachers) come from rather similar socio-cultural backgrounds and often themselves attempt to become more homogeneous, reluctant to stand out or even appear to be doing so. This apparent similarity camouflages the underlying diversity by the process of submerging their roots into the group identity of the "classroom" or keeping it to themselves. In doing so they may even be trying to consolidate a cohesive negotiating space as "students". The fact that most of them have lived in the megapolis of Delhi implies that they may not know the conditions in which people live in different regions of the country, even though they may have studied about them in their textbooks. They themselves report limited opportunity, if any, to meet and interact with people who are very different from them. This lack of socio- cultural diversity makes some dimensions of a concept like inclusive education an abstraction something that will be studied about but not experienced or lived. This cosy homogeneousness can be also viewed as a reflection of the institutionalised insulation of the marginalised from the mainstream. After all how would the severely marginalised reach a South Delhi woman's undergraduate college?

The veiled diversities, which often conceal one's concerns, begin to unravel during the course of engagement with certain units of study where there is an explicit thrust on distinctiveness. During engagement with a field based unit of study like multiculturalism as a classroom resource one of the versions of diversity that manifests relates to student teachers home language, mother tongue and spoken dialects. They become forthcoming about their regional moorings and accents', unveiling and building on this plurality as a classroom resource. In this linguistic profiling of multilinguality in their own classroom there is a holistic appreciation of language and its socio-cultural aspects. The student teachers come to greater

awareness of the personal context of their own life and interpret their own experiential reality including it in “academic” knowledge and vice-versa. This process often takes them from near to far, in this instance from their own personal background to their classroom; widening their conceptual and methodological apparatus. There is attempt to include the context and concerns of one’s own life within the fold of theoretical constructs that are studied in various courses. They become the tools for personal growth and reflection.

Some such constructs become particularly available for self-development when student teachers enter the third year of the programme. The dominant curricular engagement in the second year of the B.El.Ed. programme is theory and practicum courses in psychology. In this the student teachers read works of humanistic educators Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, as a result of which they develop a strong perspective on a person-centred education. “Conditions of learning”, “need satisfaction” and “the interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning” are among some of the ideas they engage with in detail (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1983). These ideas emphasise valuing each learner in a facilitative teacher-student relationship characterised by the elements of empathy, unconditional positive regard, need satisfaction and freedom to be; as essential to teaching-learning and personal growth. Personal liberation is located in the personal relationship between the teacher and the learner (Rogers, 1969, p.153) beyond the realm of academic knowledge or other formal curricular components. When the teacher educator practices these elements in her own relationship with student teachers, which is a personal context for the latter, these constructs can become the psychological dimensions of their own life. This can be a transformative practice and an empowering process of individual liberation as it seeks to ground academic theoretical knowledge in student teachers experiential learning. Personal growth and development is as valuable as academic empowerment as “it is the individual transformation that leads to social transformation.” (NCF, 2005, p.106).

The development of individuality based on reflecting on the teaching-learning concerns from one’s own personal context is evident in this autobiographical narrative of a B.El.Ed. III year student-teacher

I have held tightly onto the belief that good educator need to be engaged in ongoing reflective practice. The critically reflective habit confers a deeper benefit than that a procedural utility. It grounds not only our actions, but also our sense of who we are as teachers in examined reality. We know why we believe what we believe. A critically reflective teacher is much better placed to communicate to students (as well as herself). She knows why she does and thinks, what she does and thinks. It is important to realize the implications for our students of our own critical reflection.⁵

Reflective practice in the specific socio-political locale of a school

It is imperative to locate some part of initial teacher education outside the college as the preparation of student teachers as critical, transformative educators requires “to move our work beyond classroom walls into the worlds” (Anyon, 2011, p.96). Moreover schools are located in particular contexts. Teaching-learning occurs in particular contexts as well. The three aspects of inclusionary practice – critical teacher education, humanism oriented personal growth and reflective thinking interact during the fieldwork associated with various courses of education, in specific social contexts; to develop among student teachers an understanding of this context specificity. This interrelating and interaction of the inclusionary practices apart from providing opportunity to translate student teachers knowledge into action equips them with two abilities in particular. The first is to apply general understanding of teaching for diversity in ways that are relevant for their specific classroom situations. The second to critically reflect on their own specific classroom contexts and practices. On the other hand this understanding of context specificity of teaching-learning processes enables the student teachers to situate these processes in their larger socio-political context as well. It is with these assumptions that a visit to an innovative centre of elementary education particularly in a community setting is an essential curricular component of the B.El.Ed. programme highlighting “an emerging trend for including community-based experiences in teacher education” (Jones & Hughes, 2016).

This academic year the student teachers visited an institution that addresses the educational aspirations of deprived children, residing in urban slums and rural habitations who attend government schools in two districts of Rajasthan. The institution’s mission is the establishment of an egalitarian, progressive and enlightened society by contributing to equitable and quality education especially by working towards integrating the community into the schools. This centre of innovation attempts to confront social asymmetry by prioritising the education of girls or other learner- children who may be from the margin. The student teachers learn to become part of this new context and work towards an educational imagination transforming it. A striking educational practice in the schools supported by this centre is the complete absence of any discriminatory space, physical or psychological, teacher's table or chair or any other raised platform as teachers sit down on the mats with students. The entire classroom is an egalitarian space owned by the learners’.

With their own location in an urban teacher education program as the young student teachers undertake the journey to this centre, within barely a few kilometres of their travel out of the megapolis of Delhi, to the hinterland villages and towns; they move to a larger social reality as also to the specificities of a locale outside their academic knowledge and experiential learning.

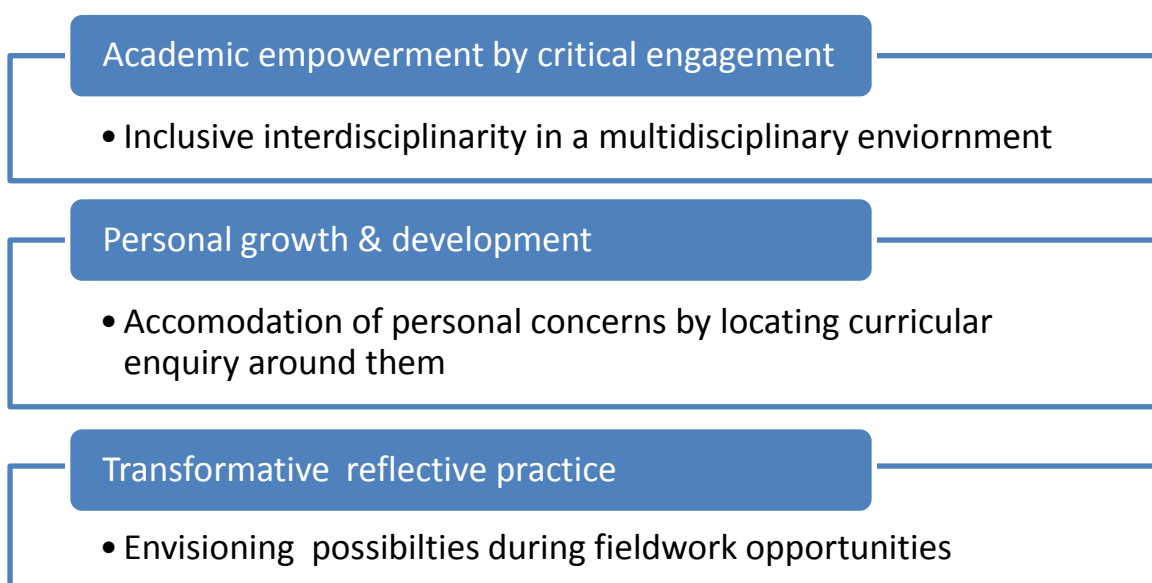
Reflective practice involves examining this personal field engagement which offers possibilities for revisiting theory especially integrating theory and practice (beyond formal “interdisciplinary” learning) and understanding the specific locale in which schools function. The “examination of personal experience” (Bolt, 2010, p.11) is located in the specific social and political context of the particular school or centre of learning. In this hands-on *learning* and deliberate *reflection on learning* about the complex relationship between schooling and equality, the student teachers come across and develop a nuanced understanding of the larger social, political and economic reality. They observe caste based discrimination that is a reflection of unjust inequalities in which caste and gender cease to be abstract categories but are functional realities that are constructed and lived. They may have viewed themselves as “inclusive” in approach but interrogate themselves in this new situation. They formulate their own responses while observing educational processes occurring sometimes along the compounded disadvantage of caste, class and gender fault lines. Caste, which as a category of discrimination may not be so manifest, in the urban context of student teachers own upbringing and education, becomes an important unit of analysis during observations at this centre of education, compounding new forms of inequality. This field visit is empowering as it provides an opportunity for reflective practice of how problems in their own teaching are related to their socio-political context; and problematizing the relationship between education and social change in the specific context of a school. This empowers them as teacher practitioners to explore issues of what could be changed in their context and how to address what cannot be changed (Bolt, 2010). The student teachers develop as reflective teachers who can envision an educational agenda especially pertaining to their own critical role as teachers in this concrete situation. This is underpinned by development of critical insights by reflection characterised by an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933; p.9 also cited in Spalding & Wilson, 2002, p.1394). The development of this critical, reflective and radical stance holds the potential for raising awareness of their professional agency which can act as a catalyst in advancing egalitarian possibilities through schooling.

Apart from this visit rest of the fieldwork associated with the other practicum courses and school internship is organised in the “multi-layered state run schools” (Kumar, 2006, p.95) system of New Delhi. However that’s not where they gain employment and their teaching context is the private school system of Delhi. The capital megapolis has a type of school system catering to each social class, well excluding the other, where it is not a misnomer to say that each classroom constitutes a social world of its own. This provides a “symbolic reflection of the unjust inequalities characterising schooling in our country” (Raina, 2015). Post Right of Children to Free and

Compulsory Education Act 2009 mandating the admission of 25 % children from Economically Weaker Section, in all types of schools, there is token socio- economic variability in the classroom. The inclusionary curricular practice of organising a field visit in a different location and personal reflection upon this field experiences; grounds the student teachers classroom practice in this new learner diversity that they come across in the private schools. It also develops understanding to support the learners' admitted in this category while witnessing possibilities inherent in education for inclusion and social change. Their teacher education attempts to be inclusionary of "contexts and cultures of schools or for how these support or constrain teachers' abilities to use knowledge and resources" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 298).

The reflective practice in the specific socio-political locale of a school that they engage with during visits to various schools, equips them with an understanding of both the context specificities as well as the larger framework in which teaching-learning processes are situated. Each time they interpret it as a test case for seeking their own answer to how can schooling contribute to social transformation.

Figure 2 Inclusionary Curricular Practices of Elementary Teacher Education



Student teachers to elementary school teachers: Paradoxes and possibilities

On the completion of the B.El.Ed. programme as the student teachers join the school system there is further problematisation of their own role as a change- agent in the real setting. In their new role as elementary school teachers they are face to face with not only systemic exclusion of children in schooling on social, political and economic basis but also constrained in their work by the larger matrix of an adverse socio-political system with established structures of domination. The student teachers are

young women who are entering a female dominated profession within not only an unequal but also a patriarchal society. All of this works towards maintenance of status quo coupled with systemic limitations on the exercise of their teacher agency in responding against or transcending these prevailing structures. The experience of joining the school after initial teacher education is rather akin to a factoryisation where the student teachers just turn into school teachers so as to fit in as mechanical cogs of the school's curricular and pedagogic machine with its rigid disciplinary structures. This process of mechanically fitting into a school system contrasts with their self- conceptualisation as a change-agent. The young entrants to the profession live this paradox in their early professional role asking themselves again as they are expected to "fit" into the existing system if they even have the preparation to become "change-agents. There is renewed critical analysis of whether the notion of teacher as a change-agent is at all a possibility? How constrained are the possibilities for transformative action even in the specific context of a given school? How much teacher agency can be exercised in the face of systemic limits or even adversities, to imagine possibilities of social change through schooling?

Be that as it may, the academically empowered young women are entrants to the teaching profession aware of their professional agency particularly based upon at least an *understanding* if not action, of teachers' potential role in transformative practices. This understanding points towards possibilities of knowledge based action aimed at social change. They have been educated not merely as objects without choice, voice or agency but as subjects with optimism of developing an alternative educational imagination. This new imagination may be based, if required on unconventional possibilities or actions counter to the prevailing socio-political ethos. This educational imagination holds promise by at least attempting to revitalise our elementary education system by taking a step forward to create schools that are sites of contest, hope, inclusion and social change.

While to the student teachers these inclusionary practices provide knowledge and agency aimed at critical thinking, personal liberation and transformative reflective practice the sharing of these initial teacher education inclusionary practices with the teacher educator community can offer possibilities for academic exchange contributing to the knowledge base of teacher education curriculum planning as well as enhancement of professional teacher education discourse. The vision; of schooling as an instrument for establishing an egalitarian, inclusive and humane social order; as a weapon of resistance that challenges structures of oppression and domination; of elementary school teachers as critical educators engaged with "reimagining schools and classrooms as social justice building spaces" (Anyon, 2011, p.99) necessitates

teacher education with such inclusionary practices with the twin aims of enabling teacher agency and empowerment of women teachers.

Notes

¹There is a successive decline in the percentage budgetary allocation to education in India from 4.7, 4.6, 4.1, and 3.8 to 3.7 each year from 2012-13 to 2016-17 respectively. The budgetary allocation to University Grants Commission has been slashed to Rs 4286.94 crores from Rs 9315.45 crores from 2015-16 to 2016-17 which is a whopping 55% cut. Source of data: Academics for action and development March 2016 Newsletter *For Whom the Bell Tolls, It Tolls For Thee*.

²Aditi Kundra, B.El.Ed.3 rd. year student, 2015-16. Personal Conversation, Gargi College: University of Delhi.

³National Curriculum framework for Teacher Education, points out that elementary teacher education suffers from isolation and is generally viewed as a unitary undifferentiated category. Due to these issues of initial teacher education especially elementary teacher education may not get frontlined as ‘concerns are subsumed under more general problems.’ (2009, p.8). Among reasons for fossilisation of teacher education it is argued that the typical focus on ‘teacher education’ in university departments of education disengages them from both parent disciplines and interdisciplinary discourse (Batra, 2009, p.128).

⁴I am grateful to Ms. Suman Lata and Dr Sweta Misra Convenor(s), Equal Opportunity Cell, Gargi College; for accommodating all the student teachers of B.El.Ed.3 rd. year in the cell’s flagship programme- University Grants Commission sponsored certificate course on Positive Discrimination. The participation of student teachers each academic session in this course allowed opportunities for deepening inclusive interdisciplinarity in the study of courses in education that I teach. This enabled me to problematize this element of initial teacher education and is the basis of the first inclusionary practice examined in this article.

⁵Shalini Ekka, B.El.Ed.3 rd. year student, 2015-16. Reflective Journal Gargi College: University of Delhi.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor Ashok Acharya, Department of Political Science, Delhi University, Delhi; Ms Parul Kalra, Assistant Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Gargi College, Siri Fort Road, New Delhi and three anonymous reviewers of this journal for their suggestions on multiple drafts of this article.

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